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ABSTRACT

The advances of contemporary rhetorical theory can be drawn upon to resolve the competing values of the two constituencies that have a stake in performance appraisals: the manager and the employee. One reason for problems in the existing model of performance appraisals is that the two sides perceive themselves to be in opposition, and that very fact of opposition can prevent the performance appraisal from reaching what should be its most important goal: helping both sides to work together to improve performance. In this context, one particular advance in rhetorical theory is useful: research and pedagogy on writing groups. All writing group theory is based on the concept of writing as a social activity, but if this is to be taken seriously, it means finding different objectives for assigning peer writing groups or collaborative writing exercises in the classroom. It means that the most important goal should be the collaboration itself, and in this new objective is a viable application of writing group theory to a new model for performance appraisals in organizations. The modern collaborative classroom translates well into a modern environment for performance appraisals. The appraisee, like the student writer, could be empowered to direct the process; the manager should facilitate collaboration, not simply pass judgment. A collaborative model for performance appraisal can ultimately help students and employees gain the skills in critical evaluation that will enable them to analyze problems and formulate strategies for change. (KEH)

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The Rhetoric of Performance Appraisals: Conflict and Resolution in Oppositional Discourse Communities

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The Rhetoric of Performance Appraisals: An Examination of Oppositional Discourse Communities

This presentation will explore one of the most important writing tasks of any organization, yet it is one that is rarely taught in business writing classes or organizational communication classes in undergraduate colleges or management communication courses in MBA programs. What is this writing task? The performance appraisal. Let me give you an example from my own experience.

Some years ago, I decided to make a career change--from investment banking to teaching. In my first semester as an apprentice teacher, I had an experience with performance evaluations that I will never forget, one that could have sent me right back to Wall Street. I had been familiar with the kinds of performance reviews we used in the investment bank to determine bonuses and promotion, and while none of us regarded them as satisfactory, we had nevertheless gone along with the system. It had not occurred to me, in my ignorance, that similar evaluation systems were used in universities and even for graduate assistants. As a new addition to that pool of cheap labor known as teaching assistants, I was expected to be put under observation for one class, so that the authorities, in this case a group of ad-hoc faculty members recruited from several disciplines, could evaluate my skills and therefore determine whether I should be rehired for the spring semester.

We rookies were notified of this plan along about the fifth

week of the fall semester, but several important facts about this coming observation were missing--most importantly, who and when. That very week, I was starting my noon class, when ten minutes after twelve in walks a man whom I had never seen before. I eventually realized that this person was my mystery evaluator, and I did not even know his name. This particular day the class was not being especially receptive for all sorts of reasons, reflecting to some extent resentments at being placed in a "developmental" class solely on the basis of SAT scores and also their understandable hesitancy to be scrutinized publicly by a stranger. In attempting to explain a peer-review assignment, I met with considerable resistance also because several of the students had not written the assignment due on that day and wanted, of course, to stall. I became more and more nervous with this unknown observer sitting at the back of the room and furiously scribbling notes every time I said something. Finally, after the students broke into their peer-review groups, the observer left, and his only comment was that he "had seen enough." This was not a particularly encouraging statement.

My future was now in doubt, as I found out he had written a most negative review, which I never saw, implying that the class was out of control, that I didn't know what I was doing, that I was incompetent as a teacher. But the one element of this entire "review" that he did not analyze was his own contribution to the breakdown of the class. Even the students noted that his unannounced presence made them uncomfortable and they afterwards

apologized to me for their resistance in sharing their work in class when a stranger was present. They were afraid that they could be judged negatively, and further blows to their self-esteem was not what they needed after years of being made to feel insecure by English teachers. (Ever since, I have always asked a class for their approval before bringing anyone in as visitor.)

Fortunately, for me, I obtained a reprieve, a second chance, and I have now been teaching writing for more than ten years. But I had that second chance only because I refused to accept the conditions under which I was being evaluated. More than anything else, I learned how important it is to have a clear objective for an appraisal and also how important it is to fight against an unfair or unfavorable report.

I have titled my presentation, "The Rhetoric of Performance Appraisals: An Examination of Oppositional Discourse Communities," for several reasons. In using "rhetoric" here, I want to call attention to both the language used in evaluation and also the crucial aspect of persuasion. I am referring to "oppositional discourse communities" to indicate the all-too-often adversarial positions of manager and subordinate, appraiser and appraisee. One reason for problems with the existing model of performance appraisals, as I will show, is that the two sides perceive themselves to be in opposition, and that very fact of opposition can prevent the performance appraisal from what should be its most important goal: that is, helping both sides work together to improve performance. To develop a more useful model,

one based on collaboration, for performance appraisals, I will draw upon the advances of contemporary rhetorical theory to resolve the competing values of the two constituencies that have a stake in the document: the manager and the employee.

Performance appraisals, like initial job interviews, are considered major communication tasks within large organizations, yet much dissatisfaction has been expressed on both sides of performance appraisals. I have just mentioned the pain caused to one particular appraisee, but managers and supervisors often share these negative feelings. Employers, or managers, are uncomfortable with the process and many times will not attempt to offer oral or written comments that can help the employee improve for the next review. Employees, or subordinates, are constrained by the parameters of the situation and are frequently unable to counteract what may be erroneous or incomplete data in either the written performance appraisal report or the face-to-face encounter. Almost every practitioner-oriented book begins with a similar statement about the universal and unchallenged distaste for the obligation of performance appraisals.

A performance appraisal system is usually set up to help make decisions about human resource management (promotion, termination, and allocation of responsibilities) and also to determine appropriate incentives (wages, bonuses, and other benefits). The term "performance appraisal" has been defined as "the interpretation of a performance measurement in terms of relative or absolute levels of effectiveness and/or the standards

of performance met" (Bernadin and Beatty 13). A performance appraisal typically has two major components: a face-to-face "interview" and some sort of a written document, that can be anything from a simple checklist to a full-scale report. The manager usually writes the report (though in some organizations the manager's assistants may do all the writing for the manager's signature). The written component may or may not be shown to the appraisee. If the subordinates do not see the review, incorrect and potentially injurious information can remain in their personnel files for years. I remember one secretary who was astounded to find out that her performance review stated that she was "chronically late." Her day started at 9:00 a.m. in Greenwich Village. As she lived in the Bronx, she always arranged to be at work by 8:30, giving herself an extra half-hour. One (and only one) day in a three-year span, she arrived late, at 9:15, as the train she was on had caught fire. And yet her personnel file read "chronically late." Not having access to that information, she didn't know why she was not being promoted or given more responsibility, to say nothing of an increase in pay. Clearly, any system that purports to evaluate performance can be abused.

Performance appraisals have received increasing attention in the management literature, as organizations, especially in the nonunion service industries, have come to believe that employee performance is one area over which management can exert some control, with so many other factors at the mercy of outside

economic forces. Much of this literature is prescriptive in the sense of providing guidelines for what to assess and how to conduct the review or descriptive in the sense of reporting on the problems of performance appraisals. The general focus is on how to conduct the interview or what it is that should be appraised; and nearly all the research is centered on what the manager is or should be doing.[1]

In general, the literature, including the "how-to" guides aimed at practitioners and the "what to measure" books and articles targeted for researchers and students, reinforces a combative view of manager-subordinate relations, with the manager at all times in control. Most of the advice is oriented toward how the manager can make the process work better, by setting appropriate objectives, by determining an accurate job description, by ensuring a favorable environment, by figuring out how to motivate employees; in short, by doing all the proper planning and preparation to ensure a successful outcome, so that the employee knows exactly what has been appraised and why. Even those studies that suggest the importance of employee participation in the process seem only to be paying lip service to some vague altruistic concept.[2]

One concept that could reverse the top-down, teacher-student model of performance appraisals is the often-used term of "coach" in training manuals. Donald Kirkpatrick, for instance, titles his book How to Improve Performance Through Appraisal and Coaching. But in reviewing his chapter on preparation, I notice

that he includes ten steps for the boss, discussed in some three pages, but only three steps for the subordinate (52-54). The manager should "decide on the best time and the best place," "gather information and materials," "plan the opening" and "approach," also "plan the conclusion," "guarantee no interruptions," and lastly "avoid inappropriate preparation" (52-53). The "coachee" is simply advised to "gather information related to past performance," to "complete a self-appraisal if requested by the boss," and "to arrange for work coverage while he or she is absent from the department." The latter step is highlighted as being "important so that the subordinate can concentrate on the interview and not worry about whether or not the job is being done properly" (54). Compare the aggressive stance recommended for the manager to the passive position suggested for the subordinate. The subordinate's preparation process consists not of critical thinking but of something more like busy work.

To my mind, the writers of how-to books and measurement studies are asking the wrong questions. They seem not to be interested in how the hierarchy of manager and subordinate reinforces one-way communication and leads to frustration for the appraisee and dislike on the part of the appraiser. Setting up a system whereby one person is empowered to review the work of another, while paying only lip service to some idea of participation, has as its objective the critique of performance, rather than the desire to work together to achieve mutual goals.

Nowhere in the literature is there much discussion of what the subordinates ought to be doing to make the process work. In other words, the existing model is adversarial, not cooperative; it is manager-centered, not employee-centered. The current paradigm for performance appraisals is very much like the old-fashioned writing classroom with an authoritarian teacher writing comments like "awk" and "wrong word" on five-paragraph student themes.

To make performance appraisals work better, we need to rethink the way they are conducted; we need to find a new model for the process. The first question to ask is what the objective should be. Simply evaluating past performance, on some hard-to-use or mechanical scale, would hardly seem to be worth the trouble, the same way that grades should not be seen as the ultimate goal of a writing workshop. The second question is obvious: How can participants best achieve their objectives? The overriding objective of any performance review, in my opinion, should be to facilitate the growth of <u>both</u> participants. The best way to achieve this objective is to work outside the formal constraints of relative positions and create a collaborative context in which growth can occur. Implementing such an approach, however, means putting aside the respective roles of manager-subordinate, teacher-student, and instead becoming collaborators working together to set and achieve realistic goals.

The experience of composition researchers provides, I

believe, a more useful theoretical framework than all the literature on measurement and ratings and the manuals of practitioner advice. The goal itself has to be redefined to do more than simply determine the effectiveness of one employee's behavior. Even the rhetoric used for evaluation should be changed much the way teacher comments on student papers have undergone a radical transformation as a result of allowing students to have ownership of their texts. A performance appraisal will be more useful when it is conducted with the kinds of groundrules that make a writing workshop a place where all can learn and grow.

One particular advance in contemporary rhetorical theory is useful: research and pedagogy on writing groups. Writing groups have been a popular pedagogical tool in composition classes for some time, as teachers have tried to incorporate the techniques of Peter Elbow, Thom Hawkins, and Kenneth Bruffee in the writing classroom. But as Karen Burke LeFevre has observed, introducing the techniques of collaboration in the classroom does not mean that teachers "automatically have a dialectical view of invention" (49). Unless the courses are completely redesigned, as James Reither and Douglas Vipond point out in a recent issue of College English, teachers are bound to be disappointed with the results. Similarly, those teachers of management communication will run into difficulties in teaching performance appraisals within a course that is still centered on the manager's functions. Lost in the latter conception is the fact

that managers are subordinates too, and necessarily need to learn how to advocate their positions effectively to their superiors.

All writing group theory, as Ann Ruggles Gere has shown, is based on writing as a social activity. Considering the social dimension of writing, however, means a drastic change in the way writing is taught and evaluated. Until recently, most composition instruction, like most undergraduate education, has assumed that student writers work alone to produce their texts, using as model the solitary scholar working alone.

But if we are to take seriously the notion of writing as a social activity, then we need to find different objectives for assigning peer writing groups or collaborative writing exercises in the classroom. I will argue that the most important goal should be the collaboration itself, and in this new objective is a viable application of writing group theory to a new model for performance appraisals in organizations. Actually working toward this goal, whether in the classroom or in an appraisal situation, is not easy, for the teacher can easily intervene, much the way a boss continually wants to tell a subordinate how to do a particular job.

For instance, consider a writing group in which students have given a particular writer certain advice for revision that a teacher feels is all wrong. What should the teacher do at this point? Intervene with the "correct" answer? The student in such a situation may indeed produce a better final product, but what has the student really learned? One thing the student would

learn for sure is to devalue collaboration, leaving answers always to the higher authority. In teaching performance appraisals, I am continually surprised by how often students, when they assume the roles of employees, will simply accept what the managers say about their performance, even when the information is obviously incorrect. These subordinates have not learned how to advocate their own positions and instead look to people in "authority" to give them the "right" answer.

The concept of a writing workshop also provides a useful construct for a more collaborative view of performance appraisals. C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon describe the features of what they perceive as a classroom based on the assumptions of "modern rhetoric." To summarize briefly two features of such a classroom: It would be student-centered, rather than teacher-centered; and the teacher should be facilitative, not directive (104).[3] This modern classroom translates well into a modern environment for performance appraisals. The appraisee, like the student writer, could be empowered to direct the process; the manager should facilitate collaboration, not simply pass judgment.

A collaborative model of performance appraisals would assume that the objective is for both sides to work together to achieve agreed-upon mutual goals. The manager would not assume an authoritative role but would instead enable the subordinate to begin defining the parameters of the review; goal-setting for both participants would be more important than correcting flaws

in the subordinate's performance. As in any collaboration, both sides would be held accountable for meeting the objectives. The written component of the appraisal would itself be a collaborative piece of writing, subject to revision and rewriting with each subsequent review.

Writing should be "a way of knowing, of learning more and more about a subject" (Brannon, Knight, Neverow-Turk 169). On that basis, performance appraisals should be an ongoing process of discovery, whereby new goals are constantly being formulated and strategies for achieving them devised. The written component of the review thus becomes a process of making meaning out of all the possibilities generated. As I have tried to show, a collaborative model will produce better results in terms of performance on both sides; but just as important is developing teamwork as a competence in itself, something that is all too often overlooked even in educational settings, such as business schools, that supposedly focus on group work. A collaborative model for performance review finally views communication as the social activity it is.

In the example I gave at the beginning of this article, I noted the damaging results of a performance review that was designed only to weed out "undesirables." Had the objective been redefined to include a collaborative approach to examining the classroom dynamic, the apprentice teacher would have learned a lot more; such an approach would also have seen the reviewer as a participant in the process and held him accountable for the

success of the particular occasion being evaluated. Students need to learn how to evaluate the work of their co-workers, superiors, and subordinates, for the various guises of evaluation and performance appraisal are present in every organization. Professional education for the last thirty years or so has been characterized by the increasing dominance of quantitative skills; yet this shift in emphasis has meant that several generations of students have not been receiving any help in how to work effectively with their colleagues and co-workers. These same students have also had little experience in questioning the systems and beliefs of the organizations which control their lives. Thus, a collaborative model for performance appraisals can ultimately help students and employees gain the skills in critical evaluation that will enable them to analyze problems and formulate strategies for change.

Endnotes

[1] How-to books for practitioners have been around for a long time, each purporting to offer a new way to improve this task that everyone hates. Thomas Henry Patten's A Manager's Guide to Performance Appraisal is typical of the how-to approach. This book contains such advice as "Keep the system simple, and keep the paperwork burden down" (19); "An appraisal should cover one side of an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper which is simple to read and understand" (63); and "Gamesmanship, rituals, and superficiality in handling the appraisal need to be understood, and methods for coping with them utilized" (111). King's book, Performance Planning and Appraisal (subtitled "A How-To Book for Managers"), includes chapters on "Preparing for the Appraisal Interview," "Conducting the Appraisal Interview," and the increasingly important "Performance Appraisal and Law." But very little of this practitioner literature does much to change the existing paradigm for performance appraisals: The model assumes a manager in control, looking down at the employee and evaluating his or her performance. This model does not assume that the employee's input is solicited or even considered desirable. Patten, for instance, recommends that "all appraisals should be reviewed by the boss and the boss' boss before the actual interview" (67-70). Such an approach allows little room for revision.

King includes a chapter on "Appraisal and the Poor Performer," with separate sections entitled "If the Employee Is Trying but Failing" and "If the Employee Isn't Even Trying" (92-96). This chapter closes with a discussion of how to proceed with "termination" if that is the only recourse. But she does not raise the question, "What should be done if the manager is failing to appraise accurately"? I have yet to see any serious advice directed toward the appraisee; this gap is all the more incongruous considering the fact that in most organizations almost all the appraisers are also appraised themselves. The top-down management structure itself is never to be questioned.

The second category of performance appraisal literature, represented by more quantitatively oriented researchers and commentators, focuses on the skills or "job segments" to be measured or rated. This literature takes the form of textbooks or of scholarly articles directed at other management and human resources researchers. As Gary Latham and Kenneth Wexley note, the problem of measurement is receiving increasing attention because of legal considerations; in their text Increasing Productivity Through Performance Appraisal, they devote an entire chapter to "Performance Appraisal and the Law" (13-36). Their overall objective is to minimize "rating errors." Although this book could be used by managers, a lot of the work with the "what to measure" focus is clearly intended for other management and organizational behavior researchers and their students. Frank Landy and James Farr are thorough in their classic text, The Measurement of Work Performance; they do include discussion of

possible "rater" variables, they report research on whether these variables influence the accurate appraisal of job performance; and they conclude that "the research on rater characteristics provides relatively few general conclusions." The research hypothesis they were examining was whether published studies indicated bias because of certain rater characteristics (such as demographic variations). While this question may be a valid one to ask and investigate, it does not address whether the system being used for ratings should be examined as well. Thus, Landy and Farr, like the other investigators of measurement and rating criteria and reliability, leave the model itself intact.

Patten, in this chapter, does suggest an alternative in that the employee could "initiate action on his own performance appraisal by completing a written draft report to be sent to his manager for study prior to the performance appraisal review." The manager would then read the draft and return it with comments to the subordinate. The two could then meet in the actual interview and "jointly draft the performance appraisal," but the author significantly notes that this last step "could be avoided if the boss simply studies the subordinate's performance review draft and then drafts his own report based upon not only what the subordinate prepared but also the boss' understanding of how well the subordinate met his assigned objectives" (68). This alternative, he notes, "appears to be participative."

[2] Elaine Gruenfeld, for instance, argues that "it is possible--and frequently recommended-- that the entire program be a cooperative venture between employees and supervisors, including top management." She suggests that "this cooperation extends from establishing job descriptions, developing standards, setting objectives or goals for performance, and conducting the appraisal itself to discussing the evaluation and planning for the future" (31). Unfortunately, such an approach is rarely implemented, and for most organizations, employee participation does not extend beyond discussing the appraisal with the employee.

[3] Knoblauch and Brannon describe two other features of the modern classroom: the assumption that composing is a competence, rather than a skill, and the reversal of the "ancient priorities of correctness, clarity, and fluency" (104).

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